ABSTRACT
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classrooms add computer capabilities, the Internet is becoming an
increasingly valuable part of the freshman composition course. The
Internet can help students do research, learn and understand
different perspectives on a given topic, and open their eyes to the
potential of the technology. The most obvious and the most typical
use of the Internet in composition is as a research tool for the
documented paper. The Internet can also be integrated with the
argumentative or persuasive paper, for instance, enabling students to
examine the rhetorical practices of participants in bulletin board
discussions on various topics. Newsgroups and the World Wide Web can
provide sources and personal contacts for writing papers. OWLS
(On-Line Writing Labs) provide hundreds of handouts about all aspects
of writing. Internet sites for teachers include the English Server at
Carnegie-Mellon, the Rhetoric and Composition site, and the Alliance
for Computers and Writing. Teachers may also inspect a list of
writing classes on the Web wherein assignments and papers are disk
files or Web sites. Although teaching the technology will take time
away from time spent on other writing instruction and assessment
difficulties may arise, composition students can clearly benefit from
using the Internet for their assignments. (CR)

Using the Internet in the Introductory Composition Classroom

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As more and more universities and composition classrooms add computer capabilities, the Internet is becoming an increasingly valuable part of the freshman composition course. Using the Internet in the composition class can serve many useful purposes: it can help students do research, it can help students learn about and understand different perspectives on a given topic, and it opens their eyes to the potential of the technology, which can help them in the courses they take after they leave the composition class.

To begin with, the Internet can be used as a research tool for the documented paper. This is probably the most obvious and currently the most typical use of the Internet in composition. Not only can students look for books, journal articles and other traditional sources at their library or other university libraries through the Internet, but they are also exposed to completely new types of sources. For example, a student examining Generation X motifs in popular music could use the World Wide Web to locate the song lyrics of bands (http://archive.uwp.edu/pub/music/lyrics/) or look up information on various artists (http://www.yahoo.com/Entertainment/Music/Artists). In looking at just

one of those musical groups, Pearl Jam, he or she would find over 40

different World Wide Web sites and be able to listen to song clips

(http://members.aol.com/clark15/eddie_singing.au), read interviews with

band members, see pictures

(http://users.aol.com/pearljam92/rockin/pj/images.htm) or short movies

(http://www-personal.engin.umich.edu/~galvin/mpeg/mpeg.html) , and

read bulletin board discussions about the band (news:alt.music.pearl-jam).

This wealth of research sources is not only common for other musical

groups, but is also the case for many other popular culture-centered topics.

In fact, in many cases the information on the Internet is far superior to the

resources in a library, and much more quickly and easily accessed. This

type of research has its drawbacks. Students can easily get distracted doing

this type of research and both in- and out-of-class time can be wasted. But

they often find the research process very enjoyable and spend more time

looking for source material.

For more traditional topics, the Internet research can serve as a

good supplement to library research. Many teachers in computer

classrooms already use the Internet for this purpose. Teachers in non-

computer classrooms, however, can also incorporate the technology in

order to help students. Computer rooms can often be reserved, and

holding one or two sessions in a computer lab can be enough to get

students started with the technology if they are not already familiar with

it. If the teacher is not fluent with the capabilities and research strategies

on the Internet, those computer days might be best served by bringing in a computer department expert or better yet, a fellow teacher with a wealth of Internet research and teaching experience. At the very least, all teachers can introduce their students to some of the more popular search engines:

Yahoo http://www.yahoo.com

Lycos http://www.lycos.com

Altavista http://www.altavista.digital.com

Opentext http://www.opentext.com

Webcrawler http://www.webcrawler.com

Students using the various Internet sources in their papers should also visit one more site: http://www.cas.usf.edu/english/walker/mla.html. This page contains information on how to document information from electronic sources, and is endorsed by the Alliance for Computers and Writing.

The use of the Internet lends itself most closely to the research paper; however, it has great potential to help students with other assignments, as well. For example, in the cultural studies classroom, the Internet can provide a vast amount of material for students to analyze and critique. Both popular culture and corporate America have embraced the Internet, leaving electronic mountains of text, pictures, video and sound to examine. In critiquing the material on the Web, students are able to see a new, interactive angle in advertising in our

culture, an aspect which often makes the assignment more interesting
and challenging. In addition, working with these types of marketing
better equips them to comprehend the facets and approaches of Internet
and interactive advertising, which may soon be more common and
pervasive than its print and television counterparts.

In the more traditional composition classroom, the Internet can be
integrated well with the argumentative or persuasive paper. Students
often struggle with gaining a clear sense of audience and realizing the
views and counter arguments of the other side of a given debate.
Through reading discussion lists related to their topic, students can better
understand both positions and their discourse community and thus
potentially write better papers. To use an overdone topic as an example,
students joining the bulletin board alt.abortion.inequity would be able to
read an active and often heated exchange about the subject they have
chosen and better understand the real debates which are centered around
that topic. Students can also examine the rhetorical practices of the
participants in those discussions and see what strategies work most
effectively in continuing a thread of conversation or making a point.
Students who not only "lurk" on these newsgroups but also join in the
discussions (perhaps such a contribution could be a writing assignment
in some situations/classrooms) are able to utilize their rhetorical skills
with a real, dynamic audience and receive candid replies from that
audience, which is much more interactive than the traditional

introductory composition assignment.

The newsgroups can also provide sources and personal contacts for other writing assignments. For example, a student writing a personal or research paper on adoption may wish to read the alt.adoption group to understand the feelings involved in the subject. Because many contributors also list their email address, students could conduct email interviews with a member of the group and use that person's information or anecdote to help bring life to both the subject and the assignment.

Both newsgroups and the World Wide Web can be useful in papers which are focused on the student's major. First-year students are often not as familiar with their area of study as they should be, and reading newsgroups or being on listserv groups (e-mail based discussion groups which must be subscribed to) makes students aware of the discussions going on in their field and the conventions of that discourse community (looking at newsgroups in general helps students gain a better understanding of discourse communities and their conventions). The World Wide Web can help students find out more about their prospective field on a local, national and international level. Their research could begin by finding out what courses are offered in that department at their university, and progress to learning more about the professors, sub-fields and graduate curriculum at their school. From there the students could find out more about their field of study (or a

specific topic within their field) in other universities, regions and countries. After doing this work, students may have a better idea of what classes they want to take, what specialties they wish to go into, or perhaps that the field is not right for them.

On a more general level, the Internet can also be used to supplement instruction about writing. OWLs--On-Line Writing Labs-- provide hundreds of handouts about all aspects of writing. If any grammatical issues are taught as part of the basic writing or regular introductory composition course, then these handouts can be used to give students an abundance of information about various grammatical trouble spots, from comma usage to subject verb agreement to fragments that the class can use. These handouts can be especially helpful for instructors who do not teach grammar in their classes, since the handouts can be used as reference tools for students who have particular mechanical difficulties. If students are having problems with semicolons, for example, the teacher would simply need to refer them to these handouts on the OWL, rather than spend a lot of class time or marginalia discussing the various rules. These handouts can be particularly useful for students when typing in their papers on a networked computer--if they have a particular question, they can simply get onto the Web and look up the answer to the question without leaving their computer.

But, the grammatical handouts are only part of the services

available on an OWL for the composition class. Many other handouts--
from ones about rhetorical invention to transitions to MLA style--can be
incorporated into the composition curriculum, either on a class or an
individual level. Teachers can also refer students to the OWL for writing
outside the composition classroom. For example, if a student is going to
be seeking a summer internship, the teacher can mention the resume
and cover letter handouts on the OWL. Some of the more frequented
OWLs include the Purdue site (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/) and
interactive OWLs (students can send their papers to tutors on-line) such
as the University of Michigan OWL (http://www-
personal.umich.edu/~nesta/OWL/owl.html) and the Online Writery at
the University of Missouri Writing Center
(http://www.missouri.edu/~lcwww/wlhome.html). A listing of more
than 25 OWLs can be found at http://owl.trc.purdue.edu/writing-
labs.html.

While the Internet can be very useful for students, it also has
many sites for teachers. One of the biggest sites in field is The English
Server at Carnegie Mellon (http://english-www.hss.cmu.edu/). Some of
the main subdivisions at this site include Journals and Newspapers,
Rhetoric, Technical Communication, Languages and Linguistics and
Calls for Papers. The Rhetoric and Composition site at
http://www.ind.net/Internet/ omp.html is another good resource for

composition teachers and researchers, as is the Alliance for Computers and Writing (http://prairie_island.ttu.edu/acw/operations/news.html).

Yet another use of the Internet is to have a class Web page. This page can serve many purposes, but some common uses include providing on-line assignment sheets, syllabi, and links to popular on-line resources. Some sample composition classes on the Web include Matthew Kirschenbaum's at the University of Virginia (http://faraday.clas.virginia.edu/~mgk3k/enwr/enwrhome.html), Curt Bliss's at Heartland Community College (http://www.ice.net/~nehring/eng102/index.htm) and several classes at the University of Texas at Austin (http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/online/index.html). [These links may expire soon--other current classes can be found at the ACW site mentioned above or by doing a keyword search using a search engine] In Kirschenbaum's class, one of the final class projects was to compose a class homepage called "Once upon a time in the 80's" (http://www.engl.virginia.edu/~enwr1016/index.html) which contained links to biographies of the students and the text of their final paper (and which sometimes included graphics and links to other Internet sites). An interesting aspect of this site is that it is adorned with the "Top 5% of all Web Sites" graphic, which shows that it is one of the more popular sites on the Web. This has real meaning, because it demonstrates how student texts are no longer just to be written for and turned in to a

teacher, and then to collect dust on a shelf. Anyone can--and thousands have--looked at this page and read some of these texts, which naturally gives the students more motivation in writing their essays.

Teachers who wish to go even further in including the World Wide Web should inspect a listing of Writing Classes on the Web (http://ernie.bgsu.edu/~skrause/WWW_Classes/), which includes a University of Michigan class, Writing the Information Superhighway (http://www-personal.umich.edu/~wbutler/UC153Syl.html). Not only are all the assignments and course handouts in this class given on-line, but students also create their own personal Web pages for the class. These personal pages contain biographical information, links to resources they deem valuable, and a portfolio of documents they produced throughout the course of the semester. Some of these documents are written using hypertext links and organizational structures common to the Web pages.

As these last two class examples illustrate, using the Internet in the composition classroom offers amazing potential and is changing the very nature of the composition papers that we see. For one, these papers may not be papers, but disk files or Web sites, which can alter how we read and grade the compositions. In a similar vein, the texts we see may not be just texts. They may contain hypertext links, visuals and even sound and multimedia clips.

This potential is not without its drawbacks, however. In addition

to the valid concerns about increased opportunities for plagiarism and students accessing pornography comes the practical issue of the amount of class time it takes to teach the technology. The syllabi in most traditional composition sections is already full in covering various writing aspects and genres. Every class period spent on teaching the technology naturally takes away from time spent on other writing instruction. While the benefits of spending one or two class periods in the computer room can be great, teachers must try to balance their instruction to best prepare students for writing and research to be done after they leave the composition classroom.

One other problem area lies in assessment. Including visual elements--not to mention video or sound clips--in a composition essay radically alters the document, and many teachers are left at a loss for how to evaluate these features and documents which have them. Web Pages and disk files bring up additional difficulties in formulating evaluation criteria and methods for commenting on these documents.

In spite of these concerns, composition students can clearly benefit from using the Internet for their assignments, in not only the research paper but in other documents as well. Given the growth of the Internet in both the workplace and academia, the Internet experience students gain in the composition class can also prepare them better for future research in other classes and in their future employment.